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# The Yukon

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# The Yukon

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The name Yukon has been synonymous with adventure since late in the last century, when tens of thousands of fortune-hunters flooded the area in the Klondike gold rush of 1898.

Although the frenzy is over, the pioneer spirit still lives. For the Yukon, part of the great Canadian North, is one of North America's last frontiers.

#### *The land*

The Yukon covers an area of 536 326 square kilometres. The perimeters of this mountainous territory form a rough triangle bordered on the south by British Columbia, on the west by the state of Alaska in the United States and on the east by the Northwest Territories. The northern tip of the triangle meets the chilly waters of the Beaufort Sea.

The Yukon can be divided into two broad geographical regions; taiga and tundra. Taiga is the boreal forest belt that circles the world's sub-Arctic zone, including most of the Yukon. Tundra is the more northerly, rocky Arctic region, where the extreme climate has stunted vegetation. Permafrost—frost so deep that it does not melt even in August and so thick that a fence post cannot be driven into the ground—makes it impossible for trees to take root in the tundra.

The Yukon is a land of varied topography. Its highest elevations are

in the St. Elias mountains in the southwest; rough, irregular uplands join the lowlands of the shores of the Beaufort Sea. The Yukon mountain chain is part of the Cordilleran, the great ridge of mountains which wrinkles the west coast landscapes of both North and South America, where Canada's highest peak, Mount Logan, (over 6 000 metres) is found. It is surrounded by several other mountains of the St. Elias range, which runs through Alaska and the Yukon. There, the world's largest glaciers outside polar regions are located.

The interior contains several smaller mountain ranges. In this area is most of the Yukon's mineral wealth of zinc, lead, coal, copper, asbestos, oil, natural gas and gold. The Richardson range of the far north and the Mackenzie mountains of the west, share the border with the Yukon's neighbour territory, the Northwest Territories.

Like almost all of Canada, much of the topography of the Yukon was moulded by glacier movement during and since the last ice age. Although parts of the territory are still covered by immense glaciers, especially in the St. Elias region, central areas of the Yukon escaped glaciation completely.

The two main unglaciated areas are situated north of the Ogilvie mountains to the Beaufort Sea, and



south from Dawson to the St. Elias mountain range.

The northern section of the territory is located within the Arctic Circle, the imaginary line within which the sun does not rise for one or more days in winter and does not set for one or more days in summer. This occurs at about 66° north latitude. Beyond there, the Yukon is known as "the land of the midnight sun" because for three months in summer sunlight is almost continuous. In winter, however, darkness sets in for a quarter of the year and the sun is rarely seen.

In many locations, the Yukon can be considered a vast frozen desert, receiving no more rainfall than does Cairo, Egypt. The St. Elias mountain range acts as a barrier to moist air coming from the Pacific, resulting in very little precipitation. Mean annual precipitation ranges between 23 to 43 centimetres.

The high altitude of much of the territory and the semi-arid climate provide relatively warm summers with temperatures frequently reaching 25°C or more during the long summer days. In winter the temperatures range between 4 and - 50°C in the southern areas and slightly colder farther north.

The coldest temperature ever registered in the Yukon was - 62°C at Snag, in February 1947.

### *The people*

The Yukon has a population of almost 23 000, 3 300 of whom are Indian, 1 200 are Métis (the product of Indian and European parents) and some 18 500 are of non-native origin.

North America's first native people are believed to have come from Asia by way of the Bering Strait. The first of these nomads entered the Yukon more than 30 000 years ago.

The Yukon's native people are grouped into 12 bands, of which eight are Kutchin, two are Nahanni and two are Tagish. South of Whitehorse are the Tlingit-speaking Tagish tribes. For centuries, the Tagish have maintained trading links with bands nearer to the interior, living by fishing and trapping in the forest.

The rest of the Yukon's native population is Athapaskan-speaking, comprising the Kutchin and the Nahanni people. The major Kutchin group is often referred to as the Loucheux, a French term meaning "squint-eyed". This name has been more accurately translated as "those who looked both ways", as the Loucheux have historically been pressed between their traditional enemies the Inuit to the east and the more culturally advanced tribes to the west.

The life of the Yukon Indians was controlled by their severe environment and the resources on which

they depended. The long, dark winter and short summer with its long days, dictated their daily pattern of activity.

Until European tools and ideas reached the Yukon, its people were dependent on stone, bone and wood implements, and their main source of food was the moose.

Naturalist Ernest Thomson Seton wrote in 1909 that the moose "is the creature that enables the natives to live. . . . It bears practically the burden of their support. Its delicious steaks are their staple food. Its hide furnishes the best clothing and mocasin leather, or provides snowshoes that enable the hunter to kill more moose. Its back sinew is the sewing thread of the country, its horns and bones make tools, its hoofs can be converted into rattles, and its coarse bristly mane. . . furnishes raw material for embroidery. . .".

The pattern of life among the Indians of the Yukon is changing rapidly, although there are still some families who live entirely off the land. There is still a large seasonal movement as the men in larger communities go to fish camps and organized hunting parties seek fresh meat in the summer.

The Loucheux Indians of Old Crow, Yukon's more northerly community, still practise many of the traditions of their forefathers. However, the introduction of modern

technology with such innovations as the snowmobile and rifle have radically and permanently altered the Indian way of life.

The Yukon's population is spread thinly over a dozen communities. The largest city is its capital, Whitehorse, which contains well over half the population of the whole territory. Whitehorse, also Canada's largest city north of the 60th parallel, has approximately 14 500 inhabitants out of the Yukon's total of 23 000, and is its economic centre.

The next largest city is the lead-zinc mining town of Faro with a population of 1 600. It is followed in size by Watson Lake, a vital transportation centre, and Dawson City, both with populations of about 700-800.

Dawson, once the raucous centre of the gold rush, is now a mere ghost of its former self. At the height of the 1898 gold fever it had a population of more than 40 000. It remains one of the Yukon's most important centres and tourist attractions, still retaining its Klondike charm.

### *History*

The first white visitor ever to set foot in the Yukon was British explorer Sir John Franklin, who was sent overland by the British government to seek a sea passage to the Pacific.

After travelling through New York, the Great Lakes and the Mackenzie River, Franklin and his party

arrived at Herschel Island, now part of the Yukon, in 1825. He discovered that the island was inhabited by about 50 Inuit who possessed metal arrows purchased from the Russians trading in Alaska.

On his return south, Franklin passed herds of caribou and other fur-bearing animals and his reports to the Hudson's Bay Company spurred the Company to send a team to evaluate the potential of the area for trade.

The first expedition was led by John Bell, who founded Fort McPherson on the Mackenzie Delta in 1840. Bell explored the rivers of the area, reaching the junction of the Porcupine and Yukon Rivers in what is now Alaska, where he founded Fort Yukon.

On a separate expedition, Robert Campbell, another Hudson's Bay employee, built a small fort on the Pelly River, then travelled downstream until he met the Yukon River. There, in 1844, he built Fort Selkirk, which became a central trading post for Indians who had previously confined their trading to coastal tribes.

Fort Selkirk was destroyed in 1852 by marauding Indians, but the Hudson's Bay Company had by that time established many other prosperous trading posts. They were so successful, in fact, that they undermined the business of the Russians who were trading in Alaska. In 1867, Russia

sold Alaska to the United States for the paltry sum of \$7 200 000 and the land to the west of the Yukon changed hands.

### *Gold fever*

The Yukon Territory is most famous for its memorable gold rush. It started in 1896 when an American woodsman named George Washington Carmack, his Indian wife and Indians "Skookum Jim" and "Tagish Charlie" discovered gold in Rabbit Creek, a small tributary of the Yukon. It was the richest concentration of placer gold the world had ever known. The gold was just lying among the pebbles, "like cheese in a sandwich", Carmack said.

Rabbit Creek was quickly renamed Bonanza and nearby settlements were emptied as residents swarmed to the Klondike. Within one month 200 claims to the region were staked.

By the following spring, many of the prospectors had fortunes to show for their efforts. Some, with pockets full of gold, returned by steamer to Seattle, U.S.A.

When the ship docked, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported, in a single paragraph, that a steamer had arrived with a ton of Yukon gold. The residents smelled fortune and, almost immediately, that ship and many others were crammed full of would-be millionaires on their way to the Klondike.



The stampede had begun. Between 1897 and 1899 an estimated 100 000 people swarmed into the Yukon to exploit the world's greatest gold field.

This amazing influx of gold-seekers put the Yukon on the map for, almost overnight, the region entered the world spotlight. The gold rush also speeded up the process by which the Yukon became a Canadian territory—in 1898 it was separated from the Northwest Territories and was made a territory in its own right.

One of the greatest beneficiaries of the gold rush was the town of Dawson, which burgeoned from a tiny outpost to a city of over 40 000. For a short while Dawson became known as the “Paris of the North”.

Dawson's currency was gold dust. Every home contained a set of scales. Activity in the city never ceased; bars, casinos and brothels were open 24 hours a day. A strong contingent of Royal Canadian Mounted Police was soon dispatched there to keep crime under control. The inhabitants prospered.

But, by the turn of the century, Dawson's boom began to diminish. Gold became less and less plentiful and many prospectors had departed, either with pockets and wallets bulging, or disappointed and empty-handed.

By the end of the First World War, Dawson's spirit had withered and

only a few hundred residents remained. The riverboat traffic had slowed to a trickle. Few Klondike miners were left and their tiny claims had been consolidated by larger mining entrepreneurs.

Activity in the Yukon remained at a very low level until the Second World War, when interest developed to construct a modern highway through the area. In 1941, Japan was threatening to take control of Alaska's Aleutian Islands, which could threaten North America. As the danger became imminent, the United States requested permission to build a road to Alaska to speed the movement of military equipment. The Alaska Highway began at Dawson Creek in northern British Columbia, crossed the 60th parallel near Watson Lake, and continued to Fairbanks, Alaska through Whitehorse, a distance of 2 431 kilometres.

Building the highway was no simple feat. Fleets of heavy bulldozers and trucks struggled through cold, rough terrain to complete the project. Thick muskeg covered much of the route and permafrost made building difficult. Construction crews were forced to pile thick layers of brushwood on the ground, then add to it a gravel topping before the road could be built. Often they were forced to make giant detours around muskeg to build on solid rock.

Despite the adverse conditions, the Alaska Highway was completed

in November 1942 after nine months of continuous work. In 1946, the United States turned the Canadian section of the highway over to Canada for use as a permanent road.

### *The economy*

The Yukon's first source of wealth was mining—and mining still occupies first place in the Yukon's economy. Approximately \$267 million in revenue from mining was earned in 1980.

The Yukon's mineral industry has undergone astounding growth in the past decade. There are three producing mines, one open-pit and two underground. The open-pit lead-zinc mine in the Anvil mountains accounts for more than one-third of the Yukon's total earnings. Ore from the site is concentrated there, then sent by truck to Whitehorse, by rail to Skagway and then shipped to domestic and export markets.

In many parts of the territory, there has been an upswing in the discovery of placer gold. There are more than 300 gold operations in the Yukon, and royalty was paid on 100 000 ounces of gold products in the 1981 placer mining season. There were 14 907 placer claims registered as of October 31, 1981. In other areas, miners are also recovering profitable amounts of tungsten and platinum.

Next to mining, tourism is the Yukon's major source of revenue, ac-

counting for approximately \$38 million in 1980, and it is increasing. Many tourists, in transit between Alaska and the southern provinces, come *via* the Alaska Highway by car or camper. The majority originate in California; many also cruise from British Columbia to Skagway and travel from there by train. In 1980 some 340 000 tourists entered the Yukon.

Approximately 12 per cent of the Yukon Territory is covered with productive forest. As yet, forest industries are limited to one large sawmill at Watson Lake, and several smaller mills at various locations. They produce fuelwood, lumber, mining timber, railroad ties and building logs. Most of the Yukon's forest area is covered by white spruce, along with lodgepole pines, aspens, larches, alpine firs and black spruce. Most of the lumber produced in the Yukon is used there, as the high costs of transportation and production make export prohibitive.

The many rivers and lakes of the Yukon are a potential source of revenue in the form of hydroelectric power. A small fraction of this vast resource has already been converted into electric energy. Hydro dams have been built on the Yukon River at Whitehorse and on the Aishihik River, 140 kilometres to the west. Six new potential dam sites have already been identified.

Trapping is still an important way of life for many Yukoners, as it has been for more than a century. Furbearers such as fox, martin, mink, beaver, muskrat, wolf, wolverine, squirrel and lynx are trapped, providing annual revenue of more than \$1 million. Commercial fishermen catch salmon, white fish and lake trout in the rivers of the interior.

Over the past 30 years, development of oil and gas has been an important activity in the Yukon. Gas has been produced in the Beaver River field on the British Columbia border for the past seven years.

A commercial gas field was discovered several years ago in the Kotaneelee area, and a similar development at Eagle Plain has also shown good potential. Oil and gas activity in the Yukon is expected to increase in the future, especially with the prospect of extending oil and gas pipelines to the north and the development of the Beaufort Sea.

Preliminary work is proceeding on the North's first major pipeline, the Alaska Gas Pipeline, which will carry natural gas from Alaska's north slope to the United States. The line will cross about 800 kilometres of the Yukon and will follow the general route of the Alaska Highway. The social, environmental and economic aspects of the pipeline are still under study.

### *Politics in the Yukon*

The Yukon has been a territory since it was separated from the Northwest Territories in 1898 by passage of the Yukon Act by the Canadian government. Evolution towards responsible government has been rapid in the past decade, although the Yukon does not have full provincial responsibilities as yet.

The constitution for the government of the Yukon Territory is based on two federal statutes: the Yukon Act and the Government Organization Act. The former provides for a commissioner with executive authority, and a legislative body known as the Yukon Legislative Assembly. Under the Government Organization Act, the federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and the Governor-in-Council are responsible for the co-ordination of government activity in the territory.

The executive level of the Yukon government comprises a commissioner in a position analogous to that of a lieutenant-governor, and an executive council similar to a provincial cabinet. The executive council is chaired by the elected leader of the party holding the majority of seats in the legislature, and each of the members is responsible for the administration of one or more government departments. There are at present five members in the executive council, appointed by the government

leader. Thus, the executive council is responsible for the entire day-to-day administration of the Yukon government, while the legislature proceedings are similar to provincial assemblies.

At present there is a 16-member legislative assembly, elected on November 20, 1978 in the first Yukon election run along party lines. The Progressive Conservatives have a majority with 11 seats and two Liberals and three New Democratic Party members comprise the official opposition.

Yukon Commissioner Doug Bell, who was appointed December 31, 1980 functions under the direction of a letter of instruction from the federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, which details the function of the office of commissioner during the process of evolution to full responsible government in Yukon. As the executive council assumes full responsibility for the administration of the Yukon government, the federal government is intervening less often in the process of government.

The major difference between the status of a territory and the provinces is the ownership of natural resources. As a territory, all the Yukon's natural resources except game belong to Canada as a whole and are administered by federal officials appointed to the Yukon.

The territory has its own member in the federal House of Commons and also a representative in the Senate.

One of the important political issues in the Yukon has been that of Indian land claims. In most of Canada, Indians forfeited their right to land when they signed treaties with the Canadian government. This did not happen in the Yukon because there was so much land and relatively few Indians.

*Transportation and communications*  
The main route to the Yukon remains the 2 450-kilometre Alaska Highway which, as stated earlier, was built by the United States and turned over to the Canadian army in 1946. At that time there was not enough traffic to justify paving the highway, but the gravel surface was widened, straightened and flattened.

Today, much of the Alaska Highway is paved and it is an excellent, all-weather road into the Yukon.

In the early 1950s, another all-weather road was built, linking Mayo in central Yukon to Whitehorse. The road was then extended north to Dawson and formed the basis of today's Klondike Highway. The Klondike Highway has been extended southwards to Skagway, Alaska, but this section is open only in the summer. The highway serves the large lead-zinc mine at Faro as well as the increasing tourist traffic.



The 671-kilometre long Dempster Highway is the Yukon's third main artery, linking Dawson with Fort McPherson and Inuvik on the Mackenzie Delta. The Dempster Highway, Canada's first all-weather road to cross the Arctic Circle, was opened in August 1979.

Despite improved roads, most freight still enters the Yukon by the traditional White Pass and Yukon rail route, from Whitehorse to Skagway. In 1955, the White Pass route introduced what is believed to be the world's first fully integrated ship-truck-train container system. Freight is loaded into trains in standard-size containers, which are unloaded at the other end onto trucks and then taken directly to the weekly ship run from Skagway to Vancouver. Once in a container, the cargo need not be disturbed until it reaches its destination, thereby reducing the risk of pilfering and damage. The majority of the outbound freight is ore concentrates.

All communities are served by air, although all except Old Crow are accessible year-around by road. Whitehorse is the main aviation centre, connecting flights from British Columbia, Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Airlines such as CP Air and Pacific Western schedule flights into the Yukon.

Until the Second World War, the territory's main landing sites were its lakes and rivers, as aircraft favoured

using floats and skis for landing. Since then, many landing sites have been constructed to keep up with the Yukon's increasing transportation needs. Northern communities are served by Northward Airlines, TNTA and Wien Air Alaska, as well as several charter and helicopter companies.

All telecommunications systems in the Yukon are operated by Northwest Telecommunications. The system operates a network of lines which satisfy the telephone, teletype, telex and telegram needs of Yukon residents.

There are two radio stations and two television stations in Whitehorse, and in addition, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Northern Service operates 14 low-power relay radio transmitter stations.

The Yukon receives television service through Telesat Canada's *Anik* satellite, which enables even remote communities to receive television signals from the CBC and CTV. Whitehorse is also served with cable television through Northern Television Systems Ltd., providing its residents with a wider variety of programming.

### *Education*

The push for compulsory education has been much more difficult in the Yukon than in other parts of Canada,

since the people are spread out in very small groups, and school construction costs are high. Because of its small school-age population, the Yukon's student-teacher ratio is still the lowest in Canada.

Two-thirds of the students study in Whitehorse, where ten of the territory's 25 schools are located. Two separate schools are also maintained in Whitehorse for those of the Roman Catholic faith, and at Burwash Landing on Kluane Lake there is an independent school for Indians. There are about 5 000 students in the Yukon, ranging from kindergarten to Grade 12.

There is a technical and vocational training centre in Whitehorse for education beyond the high school level. The centre, established in 1963, offers courses in mechanical, electrical and construction trades, and trains assistant nurses and teachers for Yukon schools. Some 250 students take full time pre-employment courses there each year.

While the Yukon has no university of its own, many residents take correspondence credit courses from the University of Alberta or the University of British Columbia. The Yukon government pays the fees and part of the transportation costs of students attending university in other parts of Canada.

An effort is being made to increase the participation of the native

peoples in their own education. In many areas, native teaching assistants are being used, and land-living skills and native languages are being taught.

### *Social services*

Health services are staffed by personnel of the Northern Health Services of the federal Department of National Health and Welfare. Expenses are shared by the federal and territorial governments.

The Yukon has had both hospital insurance and medicare for several years. It also operates a "travel-for-medical-treatment" plan to reimburse patients for costs over \$100 toward transportation to the nearest point where treatment is available.

In 1962, the Yukon established a free dental care system in public schools, the first of its kind in Canada. The program will eventually cover all students up to Grade 12.

The main hospital is in Whitehorse, with 120 beds, two surgeons, a gynaecologist and a physiotherapist. There are between 50 and 60 medical practitioners licensed to practise in Yukon. Specialists are often flown into Whitehorse for clinics, and emergency cases are frequently air transported to Vancouver or Edmonton for treatment.

Four other Yukon communities have their own hospital and other smaller communities have a health centre or a nursing station.

The Yukon's Department of Social Welfare is responsible for an extensive program of services, including government-owned nursing homes, senior citizens' homes and child-care facilities. The Department offers a whole range of social welfare services to Yukon residents.

Social assistance to Indians is administered by the Yukon Regional Office of the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Social welfare payments remain one of the largest sources of income for Yukoners.

### *The spirit of the Yukon*

Yukoners enjoy two major celebrations during the year: "Discovery Day", held in Dawson on the weekend nearest August 17, honours the day gold was found in the Klondike; and "Sourdough\* Rendez-vous" in Whitehorse, held for a week in February. Festivities at both include fun-filled contests and a variety of events. To the delight of the tourists, the Yukon brings vaudeville back to life, with Dawson's *Gaslight Follies* and Whitehorse's *Frantic Follies*, both re-creations of the entertainment enjoyed in the gold rush days.

Robert Service, one of the Yukon's most famous poets, spent much of his life writing about the Klondike. Service, born in 1874, is acclaimed for his *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*, *The Spell of the Yukon* and *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. Service also wrote a number of novels on the Yukon, a book of non-fiction and a two-volume autobiography. His cabin is still maintained in Dawson and his works are still revered for their portrayal of the excitement and allure of the Yukon.

Jack London is another author whose ideas were shaped by the Yukon. His well-known work, *The Call of the Wild* was based on a true Yukon story. Unlike many other writers who wrote of the gold rush, London actually took part in it.

A third major writer on the Yukon is Pierre Berton, who was born in Whitehorse in 1920 and raised in Dawson. His best-seller *Klondike* has added to the heritage of the Yukon.

Despite the technological change which is making the Yukon's natural barriers less of an obstacle, the territory is still an untamed and challenging frontier. Its lure is ever present.

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\*Sourdough is a term made popular by the poems of Robert W. Service in *Songs of a Sourdough* (1907). It is still used in Canada to mean a person with long experience in the North. The word comes from the prospectors' old custom of carrying dough from camp to camp, for use as leaven in making bread.













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